VANITY FAIR HOME

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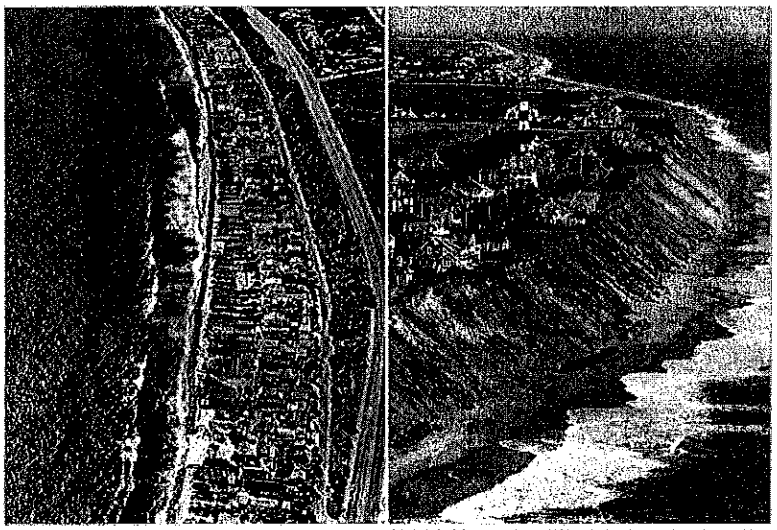
From Coast to Toast

At opposite ends of the country, two of America's most golden coastal enclaves are waging the same desperate battle against erosion. With beaches and bluffs in both Malibu and Nantucket disappearing into the ocean, wealthy homeowners are prepared to do almost anything—spend tens of millions on new sand, berms, retaining walls, and other measures—to save their precious waterfront properties. What's stopping them? William D. Cohan and Vanessa Grigoriadis report on the clash between deep-pocketed summer people and local working folks.

By William D. Cohan AND Vanessa Grigoriadis



LEFT, PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK HOLTZMAN; RIGHT, BY GEORGE RIETHOF.

SAND CASTLES *Left,* The coastline of Broad Beach, in Malibu, with a stone seawall protecting the houses. *Right,* Houses perched on the edge of Sconset Bluff, on Nantucket, Massachusetts.

Earlier this summer, on what passed for a clear morning in Los Angeles, Tom Ford, director of marine programs at the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Foundation, went to the Santa Monica Municipal Airport to catch a ride up the Pacific coast in a Beechcraft Bonanza G36. (Clad in a plaid shirt and chinos, he seemed not to be related to the designer.) "What a totally sweet glass cockpit," he told the pilot, who was donating this flight through LightHawk, a nonprofit group dedicated to helping environmentalists document problems from the air. As Santa Monica drifted by below, its famous boardwalk and Ferris wheel appearing as though they were little pieces on a game board, the minuscule Bonanza headed toward the great blue ocean, which was gently undulating like a fresh duvet being fluffed on a bed.

The pilot then hooked a right and headed up the coast. The purpose of this flight was to check out the beach erosion that's affecting Malibu, Los Angeles's most expensive and storied summertime playground. A town of less than 13,000, sandwiched between the sea and the vertiginous cliffsides of the Santa Monica Mountains, it has only one main road, the Pacific Coast Highway, but is stuffed with homes owned by what seems like half of Hollywood's power brokers and stars—from Courteney Cox's five-bedroom midcentury on the beach, bought for $17 million, to Cher's Italian Renaissance mansion, with hand-carved marble details and stamped copper ceilings, which is quietly on the market

for $41 million. "California beaches are more temperamental than on the East Coast, but mercifully, in most places, development is much further inland," says Costas Synolakis, an environmental engineering professor at the University of Southern California. That's not the case in Malibu, though, where many of the best houses are literally built on sand dunes.

Soon, the Beechcraft was flying over one of Malibu's premier neighborhoods, the one-and-a-half-mile-long Carbon Beach, also known as "Billionaire's Beach." Oracle C.E.O. Larry Ellison, the country's third-richest man, has been madly snapping up properties there, including nine homes for which he spent at least $140 million and the building that houses the recently reopened Malibu outpost of Nobu, one of the area's few flashy oceanfront restaurants, where patrons sit on plush couches next to fireplaces. As the plane passed over the restaurant, one could see that the valet had color-coded the cars—the black ones on one side of the lot, the white on the other, with the tan and silver ones clumped together, and a small pocket reserved for outliers like red vintage Aston Martins and yellow Lamborghinis.

Ford spotted some erosion on Carbon Beach. Kids were playing down there, but the beach was not voluminous. "Not great over here," he noted. But this was nothing compared with what was to come, in Malibu's other premier neighborhood: Broad Beach. The plane nudged up the coast, passing Julia Roberts's $20 million eco-friendly compound and Barbra Streisand's four-home lot (main house, millhouse, barn, and "grandma's house") estimated to be worth as much as $100 million, both of which—lucky for them—are somewhat protected by a large bluff, and eventually made its way around Point Dume, a rocky outcropping that marks the shift from a primarily south-facing beach to one angled west. As Ford knew, the west-facing exposure in Malibu is far more vulnerable to wave action than the south-facing.

Suddenly, Malibu's big beach-erosion calamity whipped into view. Broad Beach is about one mile long, with 114 homes built right up against the Pacific. These homes have always been owned by the biggest of Hollywood's big names. Jack Lemmon, Steve McQueen, and Frank Sinatra (who liked to sit on the beach in his fedora) once lived here. Sinatra's widow, Barbara, does still. Current residents include Steven Spielberg, Dustin Hoffman, Pierce Brosnan, Danny DeVito, Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell, Michael Ovitz, Sidney Sheinberg, and Patrick Soon-Shiong, the doctor who developed the cancer drug Abraxane and is L.A.'s richest man.

Over the past decade, Broad Beach residents estimate, they've lost up to 60 feet of their beach. This day, it wasn't even high tide, and for the most part the waves lapped at a huge, 13-foot-high wall of rocks. The tiny bit of sand that Ford could spy between rock and ocean was dark gray; it had been wet recently and would soon be again. You couldn't put a towel down without soaking your derrière. "I don't call it Broad Beach anymore," says Bill Patzert, a climatologist at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, in Pasadena. "I call it Invisible Beach."

"I do think the Broad Beach homes are in jeopardy, and I don't want to be cold or callous about that," says Ford. "But we have to recognize that scientists in Rhode Island and New Jersey [and other places where there's a lot of erosion] are talking about 'managed retreat.' " That means abandoning these houses and moving away, preferably way, way upland. Ford takes a breath. "We simply have to recognize that building homes on beaches is not sound policy," he says.

More than 3,000 miles to the east, Holly Finigan, the founder of the Nantucket blACKbook—"THE 'it' guide connecting those on & off island with all things hip & fresh! Crazy for ACK"—was tweeting her more than 3,000 followers: "Word on Baxter [Road] is this Bluff House only has a few more days ... Right?" Finigan attached to her tweet a stark picture of the back of the house, which not so long ago had been a large, gracious, shingle-style manor with drop-dead Atlantic Ocean views. But in the photo the windows were boarded up and the foundation was exposed to the sea. The backyard deck, where the house's wealthy Tennessee owners, Sam and Ann Furrow, once enjoyed sipping cocktails on lazy summer afternoons, was suspended over the roiling Atlantic.

The Furrows had been praying for years that the inevitable would not happen but probably

knew in their hearts that at some point it would. The knockout blow to their aptly named Bluff House—located at 87 Baxter Road, atop Sconset Bluff, the sand cliff named for its proximity to the charming village of Sconset—came this past winter from a combination of the remnants of Hurricane Sandy, a February blizzard that hit Nantucket particularly hard, and finally a classic March nor'easter, which lingered above the island for days, with winds gusting over 90 miles per hour, causing the surf to pound relentlessly into the unprotected bluff. Finigan was right: Bluff House was a goner, a victim of the devastating erosion of Sconset Bluff, which forms the eastern edge of Nantucket.

Nantucket, a disappearing spit of land deposited by melting glaciers 30 miles south of Cape Cod eons ago, has, like Malibu, long been a summer playground of the rich and famous. With its whale oil, Nantucket was once the uncontested Silicon Valley of its day, the supplier of light to America. Nowadays, Chris Matthews and David Gregory are seasonal residents, as is the 102-year-old Bunny Mellon (Matthews's neighbor). There is a sprinkling of writers too: the late David Halberstam summered on the island, as now do Daniel Yergin, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Prize and The Quest*, and columnist Russell Baker. (*Vanity Fair* contributing editor William D. Cohan, one of the authors of this piece, owns a home at 81 Baxter Road, just two doors south of the former Bluff House.)

In the early 2000s, as real-estate prices on the island shot into the stratosphere, rising as much as 20 percent a year, the summer people were increasingly made up of bankers, hedge-fund moguls, and industrialists, such as Eric Schmidt, the executive chairman of Google; Roger Penske, the rental-truck and auto-racing magnate; David Rubenstein, one of the co-founders of the Carlyle Group; Bob Diamond, the former C.E.O. of Barclays P.L.C.; Lou Gerstner, the former C.E.O. of IBM; and Bob Greenhill, the Wall Street mogul. The late Mark Madoff, son of Bernie, used to summer on Nantucket. Current homeowners on Sconset Bluff include the extended family of fabled investor George Soros (they have three homes on the east side of Baxter Road); Amos Hostetter, one of the founders of Continental Cablevision; Jimmy Haslam, the owner of the N.F.L.'s Cleveland Browns and the C.E.O. of the Pilot Flying J truck-stop chain; and Norwood Davis, the retired chairman of Trigon Healthcare. Farther south on Baxter Road, where the erosion problems are less acute due to tidal flows and the curve of the land, lives Brian Simmons, the managing partner of the Chicago buyout firm Code Hennessy & Simmons. Michael Berman, the co-founder of *George* magazine, and his wife, interior designer Victoria Hagan, just built a new home off the bluff, across the street from Haslam and Davis, on Sankaty Head Road.

$8 million construction contract breezes through Hercules City Council

Contra Costa Times San Jose Mercury News
Posted:
MercuryNews.com

HERCULES -- The City Council appropriated more than $8 million this week in approving a construction contract related to a planned center for buses, trains and ferries.

The contract, with Goodfellow Top Grade Construction LLC of Livermore, is for the San Francisco Bay Trail-related portion of the Hercules Intermodal Transit Center project. It provides for a 10-foot-wide, 3,700-foot-long section of paved trail, from the Victoria by the Bay subdivision to the future extension of John Muir Parkway, along with grading, drainage, sewer relocation, fencing, planting, irrigation and other related work as well as some track preparation. Amtrak Capitol Corridor trains that are supposed to stop at the future Hercules ITC run on Union Pacific Railroad-owned tracks along the shore of San Pablo Bay.

The $8.34 million contract -- $7,582,340 plus a 10 percent contingency -- will be financed by grants, including federal Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) and state Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) funds, as well as Measure J, Measure AA Bond and Measure WW Bond funds and an Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) grant, according to a city staff report.

The action Tuesday took all of five minutes, including quips and some banter between Mayor John Delgado and City Manager Steve Duran, followed by a brief presentation by William Silva, principal in d'Oro Construction Management and the city's consultant on the ITC project. Delgado voiced regret for the lack of "pomp and circumstance," citing the lateness of the hour, which was past 11 p.m.

By contrast, earlier in the meeting, the council spent almost 40 minutes, including 11 minutes listening to public comment, on a fee waiver of up to $1,500 for Hercules Library fundraising events at the Community Center.

Goodfellow's was one of only two bids received in June, according to the staff report. The other, from Bay Cities Paving & Grading, Inc. of Concord, was for more than $10 million, not including any contingency, according to the staff report. Fifteen interested parties had shown up at a pre-bid meeting in April, according to Silva.

The council approved the contract 4-0; Councilman Bill Kelly recused himself because he lives in the Promenade neighborhood adjacent to the future ITC.

Earlier this month, the council extended Silva's consulting contract for another year at $180,000, or $15,000 a month, through June 2014, praising him for his success in obtaining funding for the ITC.

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The New York Times

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Alaska Looks for Answers in Glacier's Summer Flood Surges

By KIRK JOHNSON

JUNEAU, Alaska — The idea that glaciers change at a glacial speed is increasingly false. They are melting and retreating rapidly all over the world. But the unpredictable flood surges at the Mendenhall Glacier, about 14 miles from downtown Juneau, Alaska's capital, are turning a jog into a sprint as global temperatures and climate variability increase.

Starting in July 2011, and each year since, sudden torrents of water shooting out from beneath the glacier have become a new facet of Juneau's brief, shimmering high summer season. In that first, and so far biggest, measured flood burst, an estimated 10 billion gallons gushed out in three days, threatening homes and property along the Mendenhall River that winds through part of the city. There have been at least two smaller bursts this year.

"That first one caught us by surprise," said Tom Mattice, the emergency programs manager and avalanche forecaster for the City and Borough of Juneau.

That the Mendenhall Glacier is thinning, and has been for decades, is only part of the explanation. Water from snowmelt, rain and thawing ice are also combining in new ways, researchers said — first pooling in an ice-covered depression near the glacier called Suicide Basin, then finding a way to flow downhill.

What prompts a surge, and the urgent search for a way to anticipate and prepare by scientists and safety officials like Mr. Mattice, is pressure. As water builds up in the basin and seeks an outlet, it can actually lift portions of the glacier ever so slightly, and in that lift, the water finds a release. Under the vast pressure of the ice bearing down upon it, the water explodes out into the depths of Mendenhall Lake and from there into the river.

Glaciologists even have a name for the process, which is happening in many places all over the world as climates change: jokulhlaup, an Icelandic word usually translated as "glacier leap."

"We don't have a sense yet how much of a threat this poses, or how much water you could store up there," said Jason Amundson, an assistant professor of geophysics at the University of Alaska Southeast, in Juneau.

What elevates the concern is the proximity of people, and lots of them. Glaciers may be

leaping in many places, but it mostly happens in isolation.

The roughly 12-mile-long Mendenhall, by contrast, is one of the most visited glaciers in the world, and an urban one. About 400,000 tourists a year, 80 percent of them from the cruise ships that stop at the Port of Juneau, are drawn to the glacier.

"We're a drive-up glacier," said Nikki Hinds, the assistant director at the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center, which is operated by the Forest Service. "In how many places can you have that?"

This summer, glacier-monitoring intensified. A pressure transducer to gauge water buildup, partly paid for by the city, was installed in a deep crack on the edge of the basin, with a satellite link sending back real-time data about the glacier's hidden waterworks. A time-lapse camera was also positioned at the main pooling site for the first time to track bulges in the ice that could suggest dammed-up water.

"The biggest thing we don't know is what's blocking what," said Jamie Pierce, a mountaineer and researcher at the university. Mr. Pierce was out on the Mendenhall ice on a recent afternoon, checking the instruments. After rappelling about 50 feet to the transducer, he found it completely dry, suggesting that the water was finding another channel, or another damming point, than the one suspected of causing the trouble.

Like glaciers the world over, the Mendenhall has thinned and retreated hundreds of feet since visitors first started coming here in the late 1800s. Long-term climate models suggest a warmer, wetter pattern in this part of Alaska, which could have its own strange ripple of consequences for the Mendenhall and the people who love it, study it and live by it.

Warmer temperatures could mean more rain and less snow at lower elevations, said Tom Ainsworth, the meteorologist in charge at the National Weather Service office in Juneau. That could intensify runoff and the frequency of surges. But more precipitation, he said, could also bring more snow to higher elevations. Greater annual snowfall, repeated over many years, could cause some glaciers, or portions of glaciers, to grow as snow compacts into the ice.

That paradoxical picture — glaciers shrinking, glaciers growing, more rain, more snow, more heat — can be difficult to communicate or grasp in the brief time that most tourists spent at the glacier.

"You're on a time schedule," said Sherry Reese, 65, a retired corporate travel manager from Denton, Tex., who was walking on a trail near the visitor center on a one-hour tour last week with her husband, Alan. "That's it. You saw it. Next!"

Mr. Reese said the net result is that most people are probably not able to even imagine the glacier changing at all, so big and eternal it can seem in its blue-tinged majesty.

"They see what they see and that's what it is, not recognizing what it was 500 years ago," said Mr. Reese, who, like his wife, was wearing a sweatshirt against the chill of the ice, with "Alaska" printed across the front.

Bay Area sea gull population explodes, bringing flocks of problems

By Paul Rogers progers@mercurynews.com Contra Costa Times
Posted:

InsideBayArea.com

HAYWARD -- Every summer day, volunteers and park workers stand guard on a small island in San Francisco Bay. At the first sign of a threat, they race into action -- blowing whistles, clapping hands and blasting horns.

Their goal: to do whatever it takes to chase away flocks of voracious sea gulls trying to eat tiny endangered birds called least terns that lay eggs at Hayward Regional Shoreline Park. Occasionally, the East Bay Regional Park District even calls out sharpshooters.

The unusual showdown is a small part of a larger drama. In an alarming trend that has scientists scrambling for answers, the bay's population of California Gulls -- squawking, flapping white-and-gray birds that most people associate with the beach -- has exploded from 24 birds in 1980 to more than 53,000 today. In the last two years alone, their numbers soared 41 percent, making the Bay Area home to the second-largest population of California Gulls in the world, behind only Utah's Great Salt Lake.

"It's gone gangbusters," said Dave Shuford, a top Marin County gull biologist. "It's been amazing to follow."

Nobody knows how to stop the population boom. And the problems are mounting: The gulls are increasingly colliding with airplanes, even causing several aborted takeoffs and landings at Bay Area airports. They're swarming landfills, divebombing schools and neighborhoods and gobbling up shorebirds that public agencies have worked for years to bring back from near extinction.

Scientists say the gulls have become a serious threat to the largest wetlands restoration on the West Coast, the effort to restore 15,100 acres of former Cargill industrial salt ponds in the South Bay back to tidal marshes. A central goal of that project, which already has cost taxpayers more than $300 million, is to bring back endangered species.

"This is one of the issues I lose sleep over," said John Bourgeois, who heads the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, a consortium of government agencies.

The gulls have formed 10 huge colonies on bay levees off Union City, Fremont, San Jose and Palo Alto, occasionally venturing as far north as Richmond and Alcatraz Island.

Nobody knows why the birds decided to settle in the Bay Area. One theory is that they came from Mono Lake in the Eastern Sierra after Los Angeles pumped down water levels there in the late 1970s and exposed their nests to hungry coyotes. Another is that a few of the birds simply decided decades ago that the levees of San Francisco Bay were a good place to build nests and lay eggs. And thousands more followed.

Landfills and garbage bins, which offer an endless food supply, are now helping them thrive, experts say.

"It's like eucalyptus trees or weeds," said Bob Power, executive director of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society. "It's something that was in harmony and all of a sudden is completely out of whack."

Few solutions in sight

Some Bay Area residents say the answer is clear.

"These sea gulls, they need some thinning," said Gilroy retiree Bill Valiquette, a lifelong Bay Area resident who has seen gull problems dramatically worsen. "Just go around and collect the damn eggs and throw them in the garbage. There's too damn many to shoot. You'd have to take 15 guys with double-barrel shotguns and go crazy."

Wildlife experts say government biologists can't simply massacre thousands of gulls. The public outcry would be too great.

That was certainly the case in 1996, when flocks of great black-backed and herring gulls took over islands at Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge off Cape Cod, Mass., prompting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to approve a plan to feed 5,700 of them pieces of bread laced with poison. Lured by expanding landfills and commercial fish waste, the gulls were wiping out endangered piping plovers and roseate terns by eating their nests and chicks.

But the experiment began falling apart after the dying gulls flew over wealthy coastal areas.

"They died in people's pools and yards and on playgrounds," said Libby Herland, manager of the Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex. "There was a public uproar."

Now, the refuge chases gulls off sensitive island areas instead. It also destroys gull nests and eggs while occasionally shooting a few of the most aggressive ones each year. Cape Cod shorebirds are returning, in part because nearby garbage dumps have closed.

Biologists could also destroy thousands of gull nests in the Bay Area. But California Gulls lay up to three eggs a year, and each can live to be 25 years old.

Even if all of the gulls' eggs were destroyed tomorrow, "because they are such a long-lived species, you wouldn't see results for 20 years," said Cheryl Strong, a biologist with the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge in Fremont. "And with 53,000 birds, times three eggs per pair, we don't have the staff or the money."

It's not like they're running out of food, either.

California Gulls eat fish, garbage, bugs, even their own eggs and young.

"Gulls are tough. They are persistent," Shuford said. "They'll eat anything. If they were fragile, they wouldn't be causing a problem."

Environmental laws are also blocking a quick solution.

Some people might think of gulls as flying rats. But along with condors, trumpeter swans and other beloved birds, they are protected under one of America's oldest environmental laws: the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. That's because gulls live in the winter on the Pacific Coast and migrate inland every spring to lay eggs.

The law makes it illegal to kill any California Gull or destroy its eggs without a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Gulls vs. planes

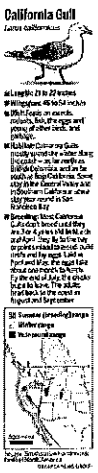
As the number of gulls grows, so do the problems.

From 2003 to 2012, gulls collided with airplanes 57 times at Mineta San Jose International Airport, a 50 percent jump from the previous decade.

Many of the incidents caused little or no damage. But some have been eye-opening. In June 2012, gulls struck a Southwest Airlines jet landing in San Jose, causing $50,000 damage to an engine. In 2009, a United Airlines flight carrying 140 passengers was forced to abort a takeoff after it hit 10 gulls, damaging an engine and its radar system while racing down a rainy runway.

Under pressure from the Federal Aviation Administration, the airport is spending $100,000 this year to hire a biologist from the federal Wildlife Services agency to harass and possibly shoot gulls and other birds that could put flights at risk, although so far no gulls have been killed.

Most of the gulls' population boom has been south of the San Mateo Bridge, so neither San Francisco International Airport nor Oakland airport has reported an increase in gull strikes. In April 2012, however, a United Airlines 747 bound for Hong Kong from San Francisco was climbing after takeoff when a gull flew into its engine, causing vibration and stalling. The plane returned to the airport to make an emergency landing.



Smaller planes have also been hit.

"I heard a thunk, and then the gull was physically wrapped around my wing," recalled Robert French, of Woodland, who flew into a group of gulls in July 2012 with his two-seat Cessna 152 while landing at Palo Alto Airport. "I was very lucky. If the bird had hit the windshield, it could have broken it and come into the cockpit, which would have been a real problem."

French, an astronomer at the SETI Institute in Mountain View, said the gull caused $2,000 damage to his plane.

In some cases, birds cause a lot more havoc in the skies.

Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger famously hit a flock of Canada geese after takeoff from New York City in 2009. After his US Airways jet lost power, he was forced to make a daring landing on the Hudson River.

Bird strikes on planes in the U.S. cause an estimated $718 million damage a year, according to FAA data. Large birds like Canada geese and brown pelicans are among the most dangerous, but gulls are hit the most, followed by pigeons and raptors.

Nearly every major airport has permits to kill birds that threaten aircraft safety. Still, at least 231 people have been killed worldwide in plane crashes caused by birds since 1988.

Growing nuisance

In some places, the growing gull population isn't a safety threat so much as a major nuisance.

In the fall and winter, huge flocks of gulls descend on San Jose's Pioneer High School, fouling roofs and outdoor areas where students eat. The birds have mobbed the Almaden Winery neighborhood and other schools nearby.

"Until I saw it for myself, I couldn't believe it," said Stefani Garino, Pioneer's principal. "At certain times of the school year, there are literally hundreds and hundreds of birds on the roof of our gym and theater. Something will spook them, and they'll all start flying at once. If it's during a time when kids are out, like during lunch, enough of them have been pooped on that they all go running and screaming for shelter."

Landfills are targets, too.

Newby Island landfill near Milpitas spends $300,000 a year to pay for 15 trained falcons, dogs, propane cannons and other tools to keep gulls from eating trash. "It's a constant battle," said Rick King, the landfill's general manager.

Thousands of gulls are also vexing Guadalupe Landfill in South San Jose, where they may have moved after being chased off Newby Island. Guadalupe spends about $100,000 a year on propane cannons and other hazing tools.

Landfill operators are sensitive about the issue. Not only are they required by state law to keep nuisance animals away from trash, they also know their facilities can be a major source of food for the gulls, which makes the landfills a target of angry neighbors or biologists trying to solve gull problems.

Endangered snacks

The landfills don't have federal permits to kill gulls. But increasingly Bay Area biologists do.

In September, scientists at the Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge in Fremont applied for a "depredation permit" that allows them to destroy eggs and kill problem gulls and other birds that kill endangered terns and snowy plovers in bay wetlands. But the permit, issued in March by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, caps the number of California Gulls the refuge can kill at 40 per year.

Wildlife officials acknowledge that the permit won't reduce the overall number of gulls.

"Philosophically, it's not the role of the Fish and Wildlife Service to control populations of wildlife," said John McCamman, the agency's acting assistant regional director. "We're here to protect and ensure their livelihood, not kill them."

The permit also says the birds can't be killed unless biologists have exhausted other remedies first, such as trying to scare them away with whistles, or using protective fencing. The idea is to take out the "bad actors" -- gulls that do a disproportionate amount of harm to endangered shorebirds.

Promising research from the East Bay shows it actually might work.

When 150 California Gulls descended on a colony of endangered least terns at Hayward Regional Shoreline Park in 2005 and 2006 to feast on their eggs, the terns abandoned their nests. But East Bay parks officials fought back, securing a permit to kill up to 45 gulls a year.

Wildlife Services officials used shotguns to kill 20 of the most aggressive gulls a year on average from 2007 to 2011. And now the park is home to the second-largest least tern colony in the bay.

"Individual birds have a learned behavior. They become specialist predators -- Charles Manson gulls," said Dave Riensche, a biologist with the East Bay Regional Park District. "If you remove them, problem solved. It's like in the schoolyard, if you remove the bully, the other kids don't learn that behavior."

With the worst gulls gone, he said, last year the park district only needed to kill two gulls.

Outnumbered

But the Don Edwards refuge is much larger. It has only one intern who searches 30,000 acres -- an area the size of San Francisco -- every few days for gulls killing endangered species. And with federal budget cuts, the refuge received no new funding for gull control this year.

So far, not a single gull has been killed under the refuge's permit, Strong said.

The gulls greatly outnumber endangered species. Most recent counts show only 202 Western snowy plovers and 509 breeding pairs of California least terns living in the bay.

"We are trying to save the species that can be wiped out at any point," said Eric Mruz, manager of the Don Edwards refuge. "When you have 50,000 gulls and a few dozen plovers, we have to focus on the plovers."

Bay Area environmentalists largely support the refuge's plan.

"It's not about going out and just killing things," said Catherine Burns, executive director of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory, which has used whistles and other tactics to scare gulls from shorebird nesting areas.

"It's about using the least harmful methods, then escalating strategies if they don't work."

The only long-term solution, says one of the nation's top wildlife experts, is to constantly chase the gulls away, disrupt their nests, better manage landfills and occasionally shoot a few of the most aggressive gulls.

For 40 years, Steve Kress has worked to restore puffins and other birds on rocky islands off the Maine coast. He said that shooting large numbers of gulls doesn't work.

"Gulls are very smart," said Kress, a vice president of the National Audubon Society. "They learn the distance a rifleman can shoot. They stay just out of range, from watching others."

Another option if things worsen in the Bay Area, said McCamman of the Fish and Wildlife Service, would be for his agency to issue a "general depredation order" to allow anyone to destroy gull nests and eggs on

their property. The agency has had success with a similar program it put in place in 2006 to control Canada geese.

For now, however, officials at the Don Edwards refuge are doing what they can, hoping the gull population slows.

"It's got to plateau at some point," Strong said. "Could it double again in the next few years? I don't want to think about that."

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BBC NEWS

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

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'Rivers' in air could boost flooding

By David Shukman
Science editor, BBC News

Winter floods could intensify in Britain, according to new research into powerful weather systems called "atmospheric rivers".

Only identified about 20 years ago, atmospheric rivers are intense bands of moisture that flow through the air.

Known to be responsible for heavy rainfall, they have been blamed for severe flooding in California and the UK.

The new study suggests that warmer conditions could create more rivers - and make them more severe.

The paper is published by the Institute of Physics in Environmental Research Letters.

Atmospheric rivers are up to 300km wide and can stretch in length for over 1,000-2,000km. They flow invisibly between 1-2.5km above the surface of the ocean.

One atmospheric river is believed to have been behind the violent flooding that hit Cockermouth in Cumbria on 19 November 2009.

The flooding claimed the life of a policeman, PC Bill Barker, who died after a bridge collapsed.

The researchers, led by Dr David Lavers of the University of Iowa, have estimated the staggering volume of moisture carried by this particular atmospheric river.

They calculate that at its peak it was transporting almost 300,000 tonnes of moisture every second.

By comparison, the River Thames carries about 65 tonnes of water through London over the same period.

Remain on course

If the rivers make landfall and encounter a steep rise in terrain, the air is forced upwards where it cools and releases the moisture in the form of rain.

On top of that, if the river remains on the same course for 24 hours - as it did over Cumbria in 2009 - it will deliver a continuous flow of heavy rain over the same area.

The most closely-studied atmospheric river, which flows towards the California coast, has been dubbed the "Pineapple Express" because it usually originates from the region of Hawaii.

It has been linked to a number of extremely damaging storms along the US West Coast.

Over the last 30 years, there has been an average of 9-11 of the strongest atmospheric river events hitting Britain every year.

In this latest study, the researchers examined five different modelling scenarios to simulate possible conditions this century and found that a warming climate - which allows the atmosphere to hold more moisture - made the rivers more likely.

Dr Lavers said: "All five models suggest that there could be a doubling of atmospheric river events in the period 2074-99 and most of those could be expected to make landfall in the UK.

"One of the big things is that these are the most relevant feature of winter flooding in Britain and the work is certainly suggesting an increase in strength and frequency."

Computer modelling

Among the uncertainties about the research are the reliability of the models used to generate the future scenarios and possible shifts in the patterns of the winds - a change of course away from the UK would reduce the risk.

It was research in the 1970s that first identified "conveyor belts" of moisture travelling through the atmosphere, with later studies in the early 1990s detecting much narrower bands of intense vapour that became known as atmospheric rivers.

Dr Richard Allan of Reading University, also an author of the paper, said: "What this shows is that the dominating factor is the increase in water vapour which means that if you've got more moisture - and the winds don't change -then you've got a much bigger potential for flooding.

"These are really massive flows of invisible water which can feed clouds and cause rainfall if forced up over mountains."

The researchers say the study could help guide forecasters trying to give warning of future flood risks.

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Flamingo (not plastic) seen in San Francisco Bay

By Paul Rogers progers@mercurynews.com San Jose Mercury News
Posted:

MercuryNews.com

Gaze out to San Francisco Bay, and chances are you'll see herons, egrets, ducks and dozens of other familiar bird species.

But this summer hikers and weekend bird-watchers are all aflutter about a new, and distinctly exotic arrival: a flamingo.

That's right. A flamingo. And it's not made of plastic.

The elegant pink bird -- normally found in tropical areas thousands of miles from San Francisco Bay -- has been spotted several times, and photographed swimming off the Sunnyvale shoreline over the past month. Before that, another flamingo, probably the same one, was seen off the Hayward shoreline as far back as Thanksgiving.

"There's a buzz about it," said Larry Campbell, of San Carlos, who spotted the flamingo last week while hiking on the earthen levees near the Sunnyvale sewage treatment plant. "When you tell people, you see their jaws drop."

Where did it come from? Nobody knows.

Officials at the San Francisco Zoo, Oakland Zoo and other Bay Area wild animal facilities say they aren't missing any lanky pink residents who sleep standing on one leg.

"All of ours are here," said Cathy Keyes, a lead zookeeper at the Oakland Zoo.

After looking at photographs taken recently of the distinctive, long-legged bird off Sunnyvale, Keyes said it is a lesser flamingo. The Oakland Zoo has 16 of them. They are the smallest of the six species of flamingo worldwide, weighing about 6 pounds and standing 3 feet tall. The birds eat blue-green algae and occasionally brine shrimp, both of which San Francisco Bay has in large numbers.

Lesser flamingos aren't exactly what you'd call locals.

They normally inhabit Western Africa, along the coastal shoreline of Nigeria, Ghana and Ivory Coast as well as much of southern Africa, including Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa, and some parts of northeast India. The flamingos, which can live to be 50 years old, breed primarily in the Rift Valley lakes of East Africa in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania.

"I don't think this bird came from Africa on its own," Keyes said. "I imagine it is somebody's escaped pet."

Reports of flamingo sightings have gone as far back as 2010, when several birders said they saw one near Coyote Hills Regional Park near Fremont. Last November, a lesser flamingo suddenly turned up just north of the San Mateo Bridge, in freshwater marshes along Hayward Regional Shoreline park.

"Some of the rangers named it Pinky," said Linden Rayton, a naturalist with the Hayward Shoreline

Interpretive Center. "It seemed perfectly happy when it was here. It never seemed to be in danger. It never seemed to be lonely."

The bird didn't have a tag on its leg, she said. Nor does it appear that its wings were clipped, a common tactic used in zoos to keep birds from flying off. Those are clues it may have been part of a private owner's collection.

"I saw it fly several times," Rayton said. "You can't get close to it. It flies away very quickly."

Although the bird hung out in the Hayward marshes for seven months, it suddenly disappeared last month.

That's the same time the flamingo turned up in Sunnyvale, in the ponds next to the sewage treatment plant.

A Mountain View software engineer, Bilal al-Shahwany, photographed it on June 23, while walking on a public hiking trail along the earthen levees about a mile from the Sunnyvale Water Pollution Control Plant.

"I was actually going there looking for it," he said. "I saw a guy on a bicycle who said, 'Did I just see a flamingo?' I said, 'Yes, yes.' He said, 'Nobody is going to believe me.'"

Lesser flamingos are not endangered. And although the bird has food on the bay, it could face a threat from predators, like coyotes, foxes or raccoons. Keyes, of the Oakland Zoo, said if nobody claims it, the zoo may be interested in bringing it to the zoo to join its other 16. After all, flamingos are social birds and live in groups of thousands in the wild.

The pond the flamingo has been spotted in is 440 acres and used to treat sewage as part of Sunnyvale's wastewater process, said Sunnyvale city spokeswoman Jennifer Garnett. After sewage comes into the treatment plant, it is treated, and then moved to the pond, where bacteria and algae break it down before it is eventually discharged into the bay. The nutrient-rich environment provides habitat for lots of birds, Garnett said.

As for the flamingo, workers at the plant haven't noticed it yet, she said.

"It's pretty exciting," Garnett said. "Maybe we should put out some garden gnomes so he'll feel at home."

Paul Rogers covers environmental issues and resources. Contact him at 408-920-5045. Follow him at Twitter.com/PaulRogersSJMN.

Morris: Saving the San Francisco Bay

By Joan Morris, Contra Costa Times jmorris@bayareanewsgroup.com San Jose Mercury News
Posted: MercuryNews.com

Undaunted by the drone of traffic on nearby highways, the distinctive call of an endangered California clapper rail rises from somewhere deep in the LaRiviere salt marsh along the border of Fremont and Newark. The sounds make Florence LaRiviere, the woman for whom the restored marsh was partly named, smile with delight.

Although Florence, in her late 80s and suffering from failing eyesight, sees only glimpses of her beloved marshland, the sound is proof that her 47-year crusade to restore the wetlands, marshes and salt ponds of San Francisco Bay is working.

"It takes persistence," Florence says. And of that, she has plenty.

Plodding along the freeways that skirt the bay, many of us don't give much thought to the fragile coastlines, and yet their survival is crucial to the millions of creatures that live in the mud and salty marshes, and the millions more that pass through twice a year on migrations.

They also are critical to human survival. The wetlands and marshes are our first line of defense against a rising sea level.

They act as sponges, reducing the impact of high tides and floods. They also purify the water.

Almost 85 percent of the bay's original marshes and shorelines, conservationists say, have been changed by development and commercial salt operations.

Some of the areas have been mined and abandoned to the point that they now resemble moonscapes, vast stretches of encrusted white nothingness. Except, of course, life does exist there, and with the help of Florence and her Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge, life can thrive there.

Florence and her late husband, Philip, cofounded the all-volunteer group in the late 1960s when they saw what was happening. They initially focused on the salt marshes, but realized that the entire bay needed to be preserved and enriched.

The volunteers went door-to-door, handing out fliers and educating the public. They spent countless hours at city planning and council meetings, reading environmental impact statements until their vision blurred, and talking reason to anyone who would listen and quite a few who wouldn't.

Eventually, U.S. Rep. Don Edwards joined the efforts and got congressional approval to purchase the lands for what would become the first national urban wildlife refuge, what was later named the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

The result of their work is a joy to see. The "wildlife island in an urban sea" supports migratory birds and year-round residents. It also is home to the endangered salt marsh harvest mouse, which drinks salt water and lives on a diet of pickleweed -- a salt marsh stalwart.

Those moonscapes have been transformed into lush marsh, rippling with life.

The work is far from finished. The Citizens Committee's goal is to restore the available bay shoreline and marshes to wildlife habitat.

For years, the Citizens Committee -- still small and still dedicated -- has been trying to bring an area known as Area 3 and Area 4, Whistling Wings and Pintail Duck clubs in Newark, into the refuge, but developers have plans for luxury homes and a golf course.

The group has mounted a lawsuit seeking to protect these valuable lands. It is a fight they will not give up on, even though it seems a never-ending battle.

If you're interested in the Citizens Committee preservation efforts, it could use your help and your tax-deductible donations. Go to www.bayrefuge.org or mail to P.O. Box 50991, Palo Alto, CA 94303.

Joan Morris' column runs five days a week in print and online. Contact her at jmorris@bayareanewsgroup.com.

The New York Times

July 28, 2013

Outrage as Homeowners Prepare for Substantially Higher Flood Insurance Rates

By JENNY ANDERSON

For the last seven years, Palmer Doyle, a retired firefighter, has paid between $350 and $458 annually for federal flood insurance. He lives a block and a half from the water in Queens, but his premiums have stayed low because of a federal policy that had protected residents from sharp increases in flood insurance costs.

Now, though, the costs for Mr. Doyle are about to jump to as much as $15,000 annually over the next decade.

Like many in the New York region, he is facing a series of events that are having a stark impact on rates: an overhaul of the federal flood insurance program last year, the adoption of new flood maps for high-risk areas, and the impact of Hurricane Sandy.

"I could live with $1,500," said Mr. Doyle, a resident of the Belle Harbor neighborhood. "But $9,000, $15,000? There is no way on God's green earth I can pay that."

As a result, government officials, grass-roots organizations and the residents are mobilizing to prevent the higher premiums from taking hold.

In Brick Township, N.J., local officials have paid a mapping expert to obtain certification in floodplain technology to challenge the Federal Emergency Management Agency's new flood maps.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg has proposed changes to make flood insurance more affordable and accessible.

Senators from flood-prone states, including New York, New Jersey and Louisiana, have offered amendments and bills to extend the time frame over which the steep rates go into effect.

"We have a lot of people around the country who are just beginning to learn about this," said Dan Mundy, a resident of Broad Channel, Queens, who is a local activist and a retired firefighter. "When they find out about it, they flip out."

At the root of the fury is the Biggert-Waters Flood Insurance Act.

Passed by Congress in 2012, before Hurricane Sandy shellacked New York and New Jersey, the act reauthorized the National Flood Insurance Program. Lawmakers agreed that they had to make changes because the program was $18 billion in debt.

"Biggert-Waters was passed with overwhelmingly bipartisan support," said Carolyn Kousky, a fellow at Resources for the Future, a research group that has focused on flood insurance. "The right and left were aligned in moving toward risk-based rates."

The legislation called for the elimination of long-term subsidies that had kept down rates for homes in flood zones. Then came the hurricane last October.

Thousands of homes in the New York region suffered significant damage.

FEMA rushed to revise maps that had been long overdue, placing far more people in the floodplain.

Mayor Bloomberg's office said that by the 2050s, 800,000 New Yorkers would live in the 100-year-floodplain, more than double the current number.

Because of these changes, the mayor's office estimates that almost 20,000 New York homes could face sharply higher premiums.

"The risk that New York faces is a combination of residents being priced out of their homes and realistic mitigation measures not being incentivized by the strategy of the federal flood insurance program," Seth Pinsky, a senior mayoral aide, said.

Mr. Pinsky directed the Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency, set up by the mayor after the storm.

The group released a voluminous report last month that recommended that Biggert-Waters be amended so that residents could buy cheaper insurance with higher deductibles.

The report also called on FEMA to give financial credit to people who undertake renovations to protect their property, like moving boilers from the basement to the first floor.

Currently, the only way to obtain lower rates is to raise a home above certain elevation levels. That can be difficult in New York, where the housing stock is old, and homes are often attached to adjacent buildings.

Economists and insurance experts said the program needed to be overhauled to make it

financially viable.

"The program is $26 billion in debt and much of that debt is borne by federal taxpayers who do not have flood insurance," said Frank W. Nutter, president of the Reinsurance Association of America. "They are subsidizing those that do."

The prospect of such steep increases has also stirred an outcry on the Jersey Shore.

Stephen C. Acropolis, mayor of Brick Township, used to pay $1,200 annually for flood insurance. His rates could go as high as $10,000 under Biggert-Waters.

"I will not pay $10,000 for flood insurance because the most I will get for my house is $80,000 to $90,000 to repair it" if it is damaged in a storm, he said. "Every 10 years, I will pay for my house to be totally replaced. It doesn't make any sense."

When FEMA released new maps in December 2012, residents of communities like Brick Township said they were shocked.

The maps put more than 4,000 homes in the township into the riskiest flood area (called the "velocity zone," or V Zone). Those houses would eventually face annual insurance rates of $31,500, up from as low as $1,000, Mr. Acropolis said.

In protest, the town teamed up with neighboring Toms River to pay for a mapping expert to obtain certification in the advanced software used to measure flood plains.

The expert, "will lobby, or produce our own scientific data to say the way FEMA did it was off," Mr. Acropolis said.

Last month, FEMA revised its New Jersey maps and now only 850 people fall into the V Zone in Brick Township. But residents still face significant rate increases.

In December, George Kasimos, a real estate broker in Toms River, was put into a V Zone, which would have taken his rates to over $30,000 annually.

Now he is in a less risky zone, but he still has to raise his home three feet. His flood insurance will be $8,300 a year, he said.

"Do you think the average homeowner can afford a $600-a-month increase in flood insurance premiums or the cost to raise their homes?"

In January, Mr. Kasimos founded "StopFemaNow," a Facebook page where he tried to figure out whether he should rebuild, elevate or do both.

The page now has 10,000 members who often discuss efforts to revamp the Biggert-Waters law.

Lawmakers have proposed several amendments and bills to reduce the impact of the legislation, though it is unclear whether any will pass.

When the bill was approved in the Senate in 2012, it was attached to a transportation bill and no debate was permitted.

One effect seems to be clear: Many people around the country may be considering walking away from their insurance, calling into question the premise of the legislation, which was to make the flood insurance program financially sustainable.

Eddie Deuron, an engineer for Chevron who lives in Louisiana, has paid flood insurance rates of $400 to $725 for 35 years. Now he has heard that he will pay $9,500 a year.

"I'd send it back in a naked envelope," he said. "I would drop it."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: August 1, 2013

An article on Monday about an anticipated rise in flood insurance premiums in the New York region misstated the surname of a fellow with Resources for the Future, a research group that focuses on flood insurance. She is Carolyn Kousky, not Koursky.